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Chapter 1. From French Empire to French Union

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:



Chapter 1 q From French Empire to French Union World War II created a situation of uncertainty in which African political activists, among others, could work to pry a small opening into a larger one. All concerned were inventing new political forms as they went along. But they were well aware that the starting point for rethinking France was the concept of empire: an unequal and composite political structure.1 The politics of metropolitan France were also uncertain ; the relative strength of different political formations and their projects for reforming French society remained to be seen. But, after the disastrous period of defeat and rule by a collaborationist, antirepublican regime, the French political elite assumed that— in the metropole at least— the new order would be governed by legislative bodies elected under universal suffrage. That a new constitution would be required for a new Fourth Republic meant that there would be single forum at which the reorganization of political life would be debated. The question was not only how far such a debate could go but who could take part in it, not least the people of France's empire who did not have the status of citizen. The initial propositions that French leaders made in regard to citizenship in overseas France were conservative, stopping well short of extending the category of citizen across the empire. But the issue was on the table as early as 1943. Most participants in the discussions were aware that one could not go back to colonial business as usual, and African voices were making themselves heard, in Dakar as well as Paris. In this and the following chapter, we look at a dynamic process by which African leaders succeeded by October 1946 in inserting themselves into the debate over the place of empire in the new Republic and used that place to insist on a new vision of citizenship. 1 The jurist Pierre Lampué discussed the constitution of 1946 under the rubric "From Empire to Union," writing "the constituents found themselves having to modify the portrayal of the empire, right up to its name." "L'Union française d'après la Constitution," *Revue Juridique et Parlementaire de l'Union Française* 1 (1947): 1– 39, 145– 94, 2 quoted. from french empire to french union r 27 Toward a Postwar Empire What distinguished the first phase of thinking about changing the status of colonial subjects was the absence of the people most concerned. The colonial establishment slowly came to realize it had to take into account the fact that Africans might want to shape their own future. But if the colonial subject purportedly had no voice and the republican citizen an equal voice, there were no evident criteria for deciding just how much voice overseas peoples would have. The war was still raging when leading administrators gathered in Brazzaville, in the French Congo, in January 1944. Charles de Gaulle himself addressed the gathering. The conference was largely inspired by Félix Éboué, Governor General of French Equatorial Africa (AEF), the highest- ranking man of color in the colonial service.2 His refusal to submit to Vichy had made him the symbol of the patriotism of overseas France, but Éboué's vision of colonial rule was in its own way a conservative one.3 The conferees— all of whom were administrators— wanted above all else to preserve the empire, and they accepted that in order to do so, they had to identify colonial rule with progress— for the colonized as well as the colonizers. But the "evolution" of African people, they argued , should take place within the framework of "traditional" socie ties. The Brazzaville delegates deplored past French policy for overtaxing peasants and subjecting them to forced labor. But Africans still had to be taught about the value of work, and their labor was needed to expand production. So the officials gave themselves five years to wean colonial Africa from forced labor. They pushed the idea of "a planned and directed economy," but insisted that Africa's vocation was to remain predominantly peasant; industrialization would have to be "prudent."4 Africans, they agreed, had to have a say in how they were governed . Those best educated in French terms could join the discussions of postwar policy, but not too many of them. If "notables évolués" 2 Brian Weinstein, *Éboué* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972). 3 In 1941, Éboué had written, "The native has a comportment, laws, a patrie that are not ours...

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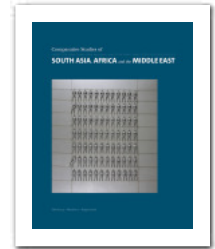
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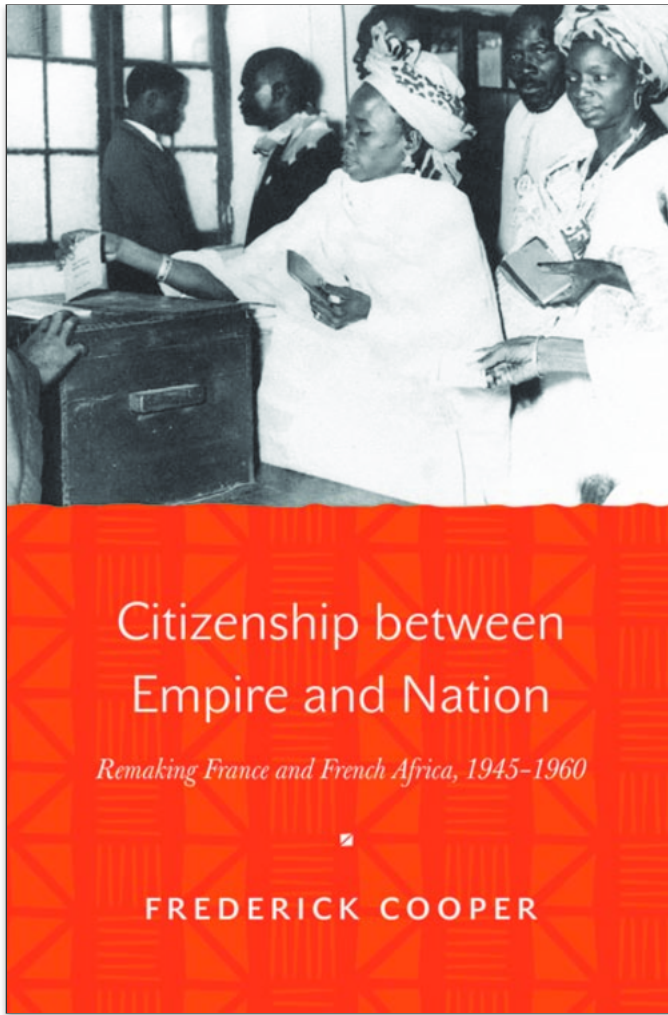
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